

Fae Dougan began her association with Swami Aseshananda in 1955 and was among the first disciples he initiated. Fae contributed this reminiscence on the occasion of her 100th birthday celebration.

In early 1955 my husband and I were in the Los Angeles area where, by chance, I met a couple who were from the Hollywood Vedanta Temple. I knew nothing of Vedanta, but they gave me a copy of *The Bhagavad-Gita* and told me of their assistant swami who had just been sent to Portland in February to be in charge of that temple. Swami Devatmananda, who had been head of the Portland temple since 1932, had returned to India because of ill health, and the members of the Hollywood temple were sad to lose Swami Aseshananda. They told me to look him up when I returned to Portland.

My sister Vera Edwards's husband was familiar with the area near Scappoose where the Portland Vedanta Society's retreat temple was located; so Vera and I went to a lecture there, probably in May or early June of 1955. After the lecture everyone attending gathered in the area near the old meditation cottage and the log house, both original buildings on the property and in bad shape, old and literally falling down. Swami Aseshananda talked and there was food, and a small social gathering. Swami sent Laverne Kutchler over to us with an invitation to tea one day the following week at the Portland temple, which we accepted.

I assumed it was to be a tea for a group, and on the day, Vera and I went to the Old Temple on Park Avenue bordering the Park Blocks in southwest Portland and rang the doorbell, feeling very strange, entering into the unknown. The temple was a large old house, three stories with a large porch and portico and lots of shrubbery, rhododendrons, trees, etc. in a large yard with a gravel driveway through the portico from Park Avenue and exiting on SW Hall Street.

We waited for what seemed a long time before Swami Aseshananda opened the door and welcomed us into the foyer. We realized we were the only ones invited for tea! He invited us to sit in the parlor and then disappeared into the kitchen and was gone for what seemed like a long time while we wondered about it all – the place and strangeness of it to us.

I don't remember the details of what we talked about, but Swami invited us to come again. The Fourth of July was celebrated at the retreat and Swami invited us to come then, which we did.

My husband was still in California and I was to join him there soon. We were in the process of relocating to the Bay Area and it was an unsettled time for me. I had several interviews with Swami – he was very supportive and strengthening for me at that stressful time and wrote to me over the months while I was away from Portland until the following June when we returned to Oregon instead of staying on in California

Swami Devatmananda's devotees were the main group at the Portland temple at that time: Lois and Ralph Thom; her sister, Ruth Henderson; Lotta Rader; Alfred Paulson and John Rotzer; Babs Bohlman and Agnes Swanson, Theresa Olson, and Laverne Kutchler. Sarah Albright was the pianist. She had studied at the Royal Academy in London and had been a fine musician in her day but was now quite old and hit many sour notes as she played at the services.

Theresa Olson once told me she had been at a board meeting during Swami Devatmananda's time while they were discussing the purchase of the retreat property, when she sensed the presence of Mother Durga, could hear the rustling of her garments. And from that point Theresa felt Mother's blessings were on their endeavor and that somehow it would all work out.

These early devotees all worked very hard to establish the Society in Portland. Swami Devatmananda himself did considerable hands-on physical labor at both properties. None of these members were wealthy; most had modest incomes as nurse, teacher, day laborer, etc., so buying the house on Park Avenue and the retreat property was a major accomplishment, all of which occurred during Swami Devatmananda's years as head of the Portland center.

When he returned to India in ill health, Lotta Rader, a nurse, accompanied him and spent several months in India visiting different holy places.

Prior to Swami Devatmananda's arrival in Portland in 1932, both Swami Prabhavananda, who later became head of the Hollywood Temple, and Swami Vividishananda, who became head of the Seattle Temple, had each spent time in Portland in the 1920s, but had been unsuccessful in getting established. At that time Portland was not open to other races and dark-skinned cultures which made it very difficult to rent spaces for meetings or to secure good housing.

After my sister Vera's and my arrival at the temple in 1955, Swami Aseshananda began attracting other new devotees. Frances Bernie, who was devoted to Swami, followed him up here from California. We all spent lots of time at the temple, working in the garden, attending lectures, and participating in the worships and rituals. Several of the women maintained the shrine and prepared for the worships, gathering flowers for the offering, making sandalwood paste and food offerings. Frances Bernie, and then I, mended Swami's clothes – and there were mends on previous mends as Swami didn't like to spend money on new things unless absolutely necessary. Ruth Henderson did the flower arrangements. When she moved to California, I inherited that job and at one time was arranging thirty-seven vases for the shrine, chapel and the many pictures throughout the temple, all which had a fresh flower vase.

During the 1960s and '70s (and probably during the '80s) Swami would gather some of the devotees for a day excursion outside of Portland. Sometimes these were occasioned by a swami visiting from another center or from India and a trip would be taken by car to the retreat, or the Rose Gardens, Multnomah Falls, or up to Timberline Lodge. Stuart Bush,

who lived at the temple, used to rent a house for a month during the summer on the central Oregon coast to spend time with his children and I remember a few trips taken to visit him there.

One day trip we made was in the fall of 1961 on a beautiful day to a fire look-out tower. A young devotee, Paula Jackson, whose boyfriend Dick Townsend (whom she later married) was manning the tower as his summer job. Marge Thomas prepared a picnic lunch (including a roast leg of lamb) for us and the party included Swami, Stuart, Joan Fox, Paula and me. We drove to Estacada and from there via a gravel road through the forest for some distance. The road ended at a small parking area from which we then hiked at least a mile to the very tall tower. There was a spiral staircase to the look-out room at the top. As I recall, Swami had no difficulty making his way up (or on the trail in and out), but I had not been feeling in top form that day and had to lay down for a while when we reached the top. The views were magnificent.

On a few other occasions we went to visit Jo and Wes Hawksley who had a cabin up near Mt. Hood and would picnic in an area near their cabin. Swami liked being in the mountains. He would stand on the shore of a stream, bend down and take water into his hands and sprinkle it over himself.

Swami often told of joining the monastery after graduating from university and being assigned the duty of making cow dung patties which were used as fuel. We too were given training in humility. A common exercise was being told to return items we had purchased, such as digging up plants to return to the grower after having been given a special price. This could be quite embarrassing.

Swami also told us that after joining the monastery his mother tried to get him to come home and put great pressure on him, but he was dedicated to Holy Mother and held firm in his resolve.

During these years there were many visits from Ramakrishna Vedanta swamis who were head of centers here in the U.S. as well as visits from swamis from India and Europe. Many were first generation, who had been initiated by either Holy Mother or Swami Brahmananda. Swami Nityaswarupananda was one of my favorites. He was the Director of the Cultural Institute in Calcutta and visited here several times while he was in this country.

In 1958, after Swami had been here for three years, he was allowed to give initiation. And so during Durga Puja time I took initiation, as did my sister Vera and her sister-in-law Mae Edwards.

Often, as a blessing, Swami would put in the palm of my hand some holy rice *prasad* from India and Ganges water, and then he would put his hand on the crown of my head in blessing.

Occasionally a homeless man, I think his name was Bob, would come to the door of the temple and Swami would invite him in to sit in the foyer and Swami would bring him tea and something to eat which he prepared for him himself.

Many a time, just when we were leaving to go home, Swami would ask whomever was there if they would mail a letter for him – and then Swami would go upstairs to write the letter while we cooled our heels waiting for the letter.

Swami Vividishananda, the head of the Seattle center often came to Portland. He and Swami Asehananda were very close. He was a great storyteller and he and our swami loved to tell about their early days in India. I took them around Portland and to the retreat many times and they would sit in the back seat of the car having animated conversations in Bengali. I remember one occasion when Frances Birnie and I drove Swamis Asehananda and Vividishananda, and Swami Akhilananda from the Boston Center, to the retreat where we meditated together in the little cottage.

I will never forget an especially important event that occurred once at the retreat. It was late in the day and I was driving Swami from the temple over to the meditation cottage. Vera was in the back seat. I parked near the meditation cottage and for a while, I don't know how long, we sat there very quietly. There was stillness. Suddenly I heard the flutter of wings. No one spoke. There was quiet. And then, Swami got out of the car and went into the meditation cottage. Vera and I didn't say a word. After a short while Swami came back and got in the car. We sat there quietly for a few moments, and then he said something like "We'll go now." He never spoke of his experience and neither of us asked any questions. In fact, I don't remember if Vera and I discussed what had transpired that day until a long time after. It seemed we had been allowed to be present for a very Holy happening for Swami and not something to be talked about.

At the time, my thought was that it was a visitation from another plane, something like breaking the sound barrier. I thought of artists down through the ages depicting holy angels, always with wings. Only in recent years have I talked about this. And yet, how to find words to convey such an experience... to have received the blessings of our Guru, to have had the privilege to be present at a moment like that, to witness the rare glimpse of the Divine.*

When the Park Avenue temple was sold to Portland State University and the move into the current temple was completed in the late 1960s, all these closer connections changed as the new temple was now also a monastery.

*[Editor's note: See also Vera Edwards's account of this incident in her [reminiscence](#), p. 102.]

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